

ST. NICHOLAS DAY IN HOLLAND.

BY ANNIE C. KUIPER.

HAVE you ever been in Holland? I don't mean to ask whether you have passed through it on your way to Germany or Switzerland; but have you really seen the country and its peculiar beauties? If you have, you must have admired the pretty walks along the canals in Amsterdam, and the fine old houses and high bridges in the ancient part of the town, the beautiful scenery of The Hague and Scheveningue, the splendid picture-galleries, the lovely woods near Arnhem and the surrounding villages, the green meadows with their famous cattle in the northern part of the country, and —ever so many things more, which you should some day visit if you have not yet seen them.

Holland naturally looks its prettiest in spring and in summer, though it is a fine sight to see the skating on the canals and on the ponds in the parks upon a bright winter day. But not all days in winter *are* bright in Holland. We have no London fogs; but we, as well as the inhabitants of the English metropolis, have our share of rain and mud. If you could see Amsterdam during the dark days of November and December, you would not be much charmed with it, I fear.

And yet there are days in those months when, notwithstanding the bad temper of the weather and the muddy slipperiness of the streets, all the large and small towns in Holland, and the villages and hamlets as well, wear a look of importance, of something unusual going on, and something well worth seeing. This is on the days preceding December 6, and on that day itself, when old and young remember and praise St. Nicholas, the dear old saint of long ago. There is a pleasant, bright, festive look about the shops, a gay bustle among the customers, a cheerful good-nature shown by people meeting on the streets, which reminds one of the famous description of an English Christmas in Dickens's "Christmas Carol."

The city of Amsterdam claims St. Nicholas as its patron saint, and during the first week of December confectioners' shops throughout the city display one special delicacy called "St. Nicholas cake," of which large quantities are sold at this season. "Men" and "women" made of this crisp, brown cake, or gingerbread, can be bought in different sizes and at all prices. These sweet creatures are often called "sweethearts" ("vrijers" we say in Dutch), and the girls receive a "man," the boys a "woman." I remember quite well what fun it used to be to hear the servant come in with: "If you please, ma'am, here is Miss Annie's sweetheart"—and see her hand a gingerbread man to my mother.

Most of the confectioners—indeed, nearly *all* shopkeepers—give up one of their private rooms for the purpose of showing off their Christmas wares to the best advantage.

At the confectioners' happy children gaze upon little candy tables, chairs, mice, cats, dogs, funny little clowns and babies, dolls' houses, whistles, fishes, cigars,—the whole alphabet in pretty letters; in fact, everything,—in sugar and chocolate. I have often seen little children, allowed to choose one or two of these precious dainties, take in all the splendor of a confectioner's shop with glistening eyes, and stand hesitating, hesitating, unable to decide what they would like to possess most.

Naturally proud is the happy confectioner of his lovely "hearts," the large pieces of delicious marchpane which his energy molds into heart shape. A very frequent joke is the sending of such a heart to an intimate friend. It sometimes means something, but as a rule is nothing but a joke. Of course most girls like having such an innocent heart sent to them; and it is funny to see the mysterious look with which one tells another: "I had a large heart sent to me last night. I cannot possibly think who sent it!"

One kind of gingerbread is very popular at the feast of St. Nicholas. From its toughness it is called "tough-tough" (Dutch, *taai-taai*). One needs very good, sound teeth to eat this hard, brown delicacy, which, however, becomes

their rarity at this time of the year; the fancy-shops, with their beautiful vases and brackets, tiny lamps, blue-and-white jugs, and tiles, which are the delight of all foreigners; and the toy-shops, which seem to rival each other in an endless variety of dolls and dolls' houses, rocking-horses, whips, balls, tram-cars, and carriages.

Some of the linen-drapers' shops have a grand representation of St. Nicholas in the window. He is mounted on a fiery horse, wears his miter and bright red robe, and has a kind face with a long, white beard, and his black servant Jan (John) stands behind him. One can always see groups of little ones admiring the figures.

Many of the other shops are made specially attractive by the so-called "surprises" in the windows. Sometimes they consist of artificial apples made of soap, with a mysterious opening somewhere, in which the present has to be concealed. We also see beautifully imitated pieces of meat, loaves, old hats, funny little Chinese figures, grim chimney-sweeps, big carrots, and so on. But the nicest and most intricate sur-

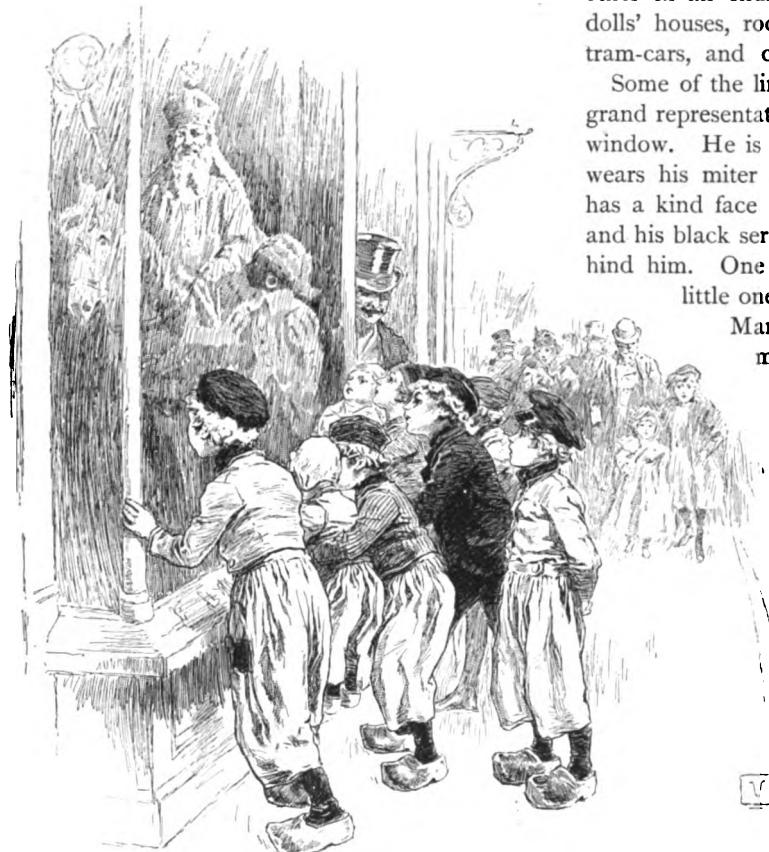
mellow with age if patiently kept for some time in a tin box.

It is a treat to go through the streets of Amsterdam in this first week of December, and to walk leisurely past the shops, which all look their best and brightest, often in pleasant contrast to the gloomy and dirty weather.

The jewelers' shops, with their splendid show of glistening rings and necklaces, diamonds of all sizes, brooches and bracelets, little knick-knacks and costly trifles, attract a great deal of attention. So do the fruit-shops, with their red-cheeked apples and fine hothouse grapes and pears; the flower-shops, with their delicate ferns and roses, looking the prettier because of

prises are those made by the giver himself or herself. Of these more hereafter.

The greatest fun, after all, goes on *in* the houses, not outside. In some families with many little children the night preceding December 5 shows a worthy preparation of the famous things which are to follow. Santa Claus (or Sint-Nicolaas, also Sinterklaas, as he is called in Holland) mounts his fiery steed and rides over the roofs of the houses. He often puts his hand into his capacious pocket, and out comes an abundance of sweets, which he throws through the chimneys into the rooms where the glad children, who have been singing the Saint's praises ever since dinner-time,



ST. NICHOLAS IN THE WINDOW.

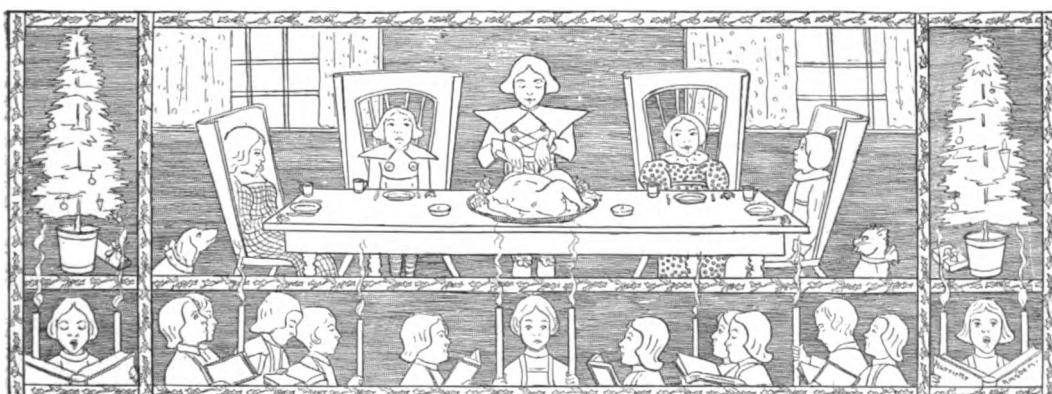
rush at the rain of goodies and gather as much as they possibly can.

Sometimes a brave little mite of four or five years goes as near as possible to the chimney, and cries out in a loud, clear voice: "*Dank je wel, Sinterklaas!*" ("Thank you very much, Santa Claus!") The next evening the same brave child may have to recite a piece of poetry when St. Nicholas stands before her in all his glory of miter, white beard, and red robe trimmed with gold and soft white fur. His black servant stands grinning behind, and the little child feels so much awed by the presence of the two visitors that the poem is recited in an extremely low voice. Needless to say that there is always an uncle or a friend of the family willing to represent St. Nicholas. The Saint himself hands round the presents, which his black servant has been carrying in a large bag, and afterward disappears—not up the chimney, but, like an ordinary mortal, through the door.

In some houses the little children who go to bed early put out their shoes and stockings and find them crammed with presents in the morning. Others have to play a game of hide-and-seek for their presents, which the father and mother have hidden in the most mysterious manner and in out-of-the-way places. In a great many families, however, December 5 is celebrated by sending and receiving parcels in

the evening of that day. "Parcels" must be taken here in a very broad sense. The servant who has to answer the bell is obliged to bring in whatever is put into her hands or before her, and consequently is often heard to giggle behind the door of the room in which the whole family is assembled. Then in walks—nay, is put—a most extraordinary-looking gentleman or old lady, or a queer animal, consisting chiefly of wood or of linen filled with sawdust, in which the present, sometimes one of very small dimensions, lies concealed. Funny little rhymes often accompany the parcels; and generally much good-natured teasing is contained in the poetical lines. The patience of some people is often sorely tried by a parcel consisting of a big ball of very fine cotton, which has to be unwound to get at the present.

The day after St. Nicholas there is such a lot of talking and laughing going on in the school-room, such a buzz, such exclamations of joy and admiration, and, among the girls, such kissing and warm thanksgivings, and so very little inclination for the every-day duties of life, that the teacher's patience may be tried; but he or she also has had a bright St. Nicholas eve, and has enjoyed it so thoroughly that for once work and learning get less attention than they deserve, and are neglected for a nice, bright talk which takes up the first half hour of the day.



AN OLD-TIME CHRISTMAS DINNER.



IT 'S A SERIOUS THING TO WALK ABROAD
DRESSED UP IN FINEST STYLE;



ABOUT OUR WORK WITHIN THE HOUSE
WE 'RE MERRY ALL THE WHILE.